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The Scent of Fish Sauce

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The Scent of Fish Sauce

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Report

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Abstract

The Scent of Fish Sauce

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: PJ Raval

The following report describes the conception, pre-production, production and post-production of Minh Trinh's short-narrative thesis film. The report contains a deep discussion of the origin of the story, the writing process and the rationale behind the director's artistic choices for the film.

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Introduction

When I received the Fulbright scholarship and was accepted into the film grad program of The University of Texas at Austin, I always knew that I had to complete the program in three years as it was one of the requirements of the scholarship. Knowing your deadline can give you some pressure but on the other hand, it also keeps you in good discipline. I appreciate the fact that I had to strictly stick to a planned schedule.

After my pre-thesis, for which I had set high goals on a technical level, for myself and the crew, but only partly achieved those goals, I was exhausted and not really ready to make another film. Seeing my fellow MFA candidates taking their time and not in any hurry to get their own theses done, I had trouble finding motivation and felt isolated by the sense that I would have to find my own road.

Looking back to my pre-thesis, I was happy with a lot of elements but also was exhausted and disappointed by it. I learned that a director's ability was limited; that trying to take on the work of production design or producing, for example, was too much when I was busy just trying to direct actors. I learned that night shoots were extremely hard, especially when working with an understaffed crew. And I struggled in communicating with the DP, cast and crew as a result of my limited English. I also felt bad for not offering the DP, Allen Ho, enough staff. Starting from the pre-thesis production, I tried my best to make more connections in the department, which is the only way people from outside my class would be willing to help. I also suffered from a long but not so effective postproduction process, which would've been improved with the help of an editor. At the end of the day, I made several mistakes in editing, color grading and exporting the final files. However, despite the struggles and shortcomings of the film, I do feel proud of the final product. Ironically I made a film about a young artist who is struggling to emerge in the area of art and to find the ideal beauty, and I struggled just like him. I realized I would have to continue that struggle and that fight, in order to make my thesis film.

Hearing feedback from the audience after screening the pre-thesis was a heart-breaking process. Most of the criticisms were for the story of the film. Many viewers felt the story was not strong enough and that it lacked conflicts, suspense or a climax. Some feedback pointed out that the whole film seemed like a sad and sentimental monologue by the director about art. Even more critically, some Vietnamese viewers said the story was bland and didn't transmit any emotion to the audience. I understood the 'lacking drama' feedback but was hurt by the 'emotionless' feedback. I believed one of the strong points of my films, in general, was their quality of sensitivity and emotion. Thus, if the audience said the film was emotionless, I considered it was a big failure.

Therefore, I set some requirements for my thesis, which were:

- It should be about Vietnamese whether they live in Vietnam or in the US,
- I must work with a production designer,
- The story should have some dramatic elements to balance with my subtle, static and slow-paced narrative style,
- There definitely would be no night shoot for the whole film,
- It would contain no more than three locations.

Concept

During my time in the program, I made three films and they are all pretty dark films. *Mama, I'm Not Coming Back Home*, the documentary I made in my first year, is a bittersweet story about young Vietnamese who came to study in the US and decided not to return home in order to develop their careers here. The subjects in the film have to tell their families that they cannot come back home for the New Year (the most important Vietnamese holiday) for several consecutive years. It was shot 90% at night.

Anonymous, my first year narrative is about a young man having an encounter with a complete stranger in a hotel to try and understand more about himself. They have a moment together. The time of day is not obvious but everything in the film is dark as it happens in a dark hotel room and in an anonymous circumstance.

Self-portrait, my pre-thesis film, was shot totally at night. The film explores the coming of age story of a young photographer who seeks for the beauty of art and finds more sorrow and confusion/isolation instead. The film is dark, slow and sentimental.

I feel proud of all the works I have done as a student in RTF. All of the films share a common and recurring theme of encounters between strangers who share and feel connected for a moment until they detach again. I explored the darkness of the night, and how that mirrors the darkness within a person's mind, through those films. I also used the motif of lingering close-ups until the moment of truth emerges from within the characters to depict melancholy and isolation.

Thinking about my thesis, I knew for sure I would explore the motif of a temporary connection between strangers again. However, I set a more challenging goal: depicting the darkness and isolation during daytime instead of nighttime. Part of the reason was I that I had come to hate night shoots. But the more important reason was in my conception: there is a dark part in the light, even in the daytime.

To make a bright film appear dark is more challenging. My strong desire was to discover the dark side inside the human mind.

And I wanted to make a film about being Vietnamese. After making two narrative films about Americans, I felt like I wanted to make a film involving Vietnamese culture and identity. Moreover, as a Vietnamese filmmaker, I thought it would benefit my future career by identifying my thesis film as a Vietnamese film. As such, I could prove to Vietnamese producers that I am capable of satisfying the taste of Vietnamese audience.

Having identified a clear goal and set some clear restrictions, I now began to develop an idea for the film.

Since coming to the US, I had started cooking. I had never really cooked in Vietnam as my mother was a great cook and I went to my parent's house almost everyday to have dinner with them. Coming to the US was a new chance for me to really live independently by myself. Being away from home, I missed the taste of Vietnamese food as the way the Vietnamese restaurants in Austin prepared and served food was not truly authentic. I started looking at cooking videos or articles on the internet and kept trying new recipes. For me, cooking is a way to save money by not having to eat out, a way to satisfy my desire for authentic food, and also a process I learned to really enjoy. I also love serving my American friends Vietnamese food as a way to introduce Vietnamese culture. For me, food is a primary element in each culture. Through culinary art, we can gain a deeper, more profound understanding about a culture that we have not been familiar with.

Living in a shared housing situation, I also faced some trouble when cooking. Fish sauce is the most important condiment in Vietnamese cuisine but it has a really strong, pungent aroma. I was surprised to find that my housemates, actually, almost couldn't stand it. But I simply could not skip fish sauce for my food, as it could be considered the spirit of Vietnamese cuisine. I tried to be as respectful as possible when I cooked with fish sauce: closing all of the doors to the kitchen, turning on the vent fan and opening the windows, and using deodorizing spray. My housemates

had never really forbidden me from cooking with fish sauce. But I always felt their frustration each time I cooked with it.

As a foreigner living in the US, I always feel a cultural gap between what I can share and what people can understand. Fish sauce is a good example of that cultural difference. I do not think my housemates will ever really be able to appreciate it.

From these experiences, I developed the idea of making a film about cooking and fish sauce: despite how much we try to cross the cultural gap, can we really understand each other if we come from different backgrounds.

Immersing myself deeper in the idea of making a film about fish sauce, I recalled *Tam Cam*, one of the most popular Vietnamese fairy tales, which every single Vietnamese knows and remembers by heart. The fairy tale is about a meek and patient Vietnamese girl who dies and re-animates many times after being murdered by her stepmother and stepsister. The protagonist in this fairy tale is an innocent, patient and nice girl at the beginning but she changes and evolves each time she re-animates after dying. At the end of the fairy tale, she boils her stepsister, salting and fermenting her to make a sauce (just like the process for making fish sauce) and sends a jar of that sauce to her stepmother. The stepmother enjoys the sauce very much, until she finds a bone at the bottom of the jar and realizes it is from her daughter.

"In the first part of the tale, Tam lived under the tyranny of her stepmother and stepsister, Cam, until she was visited by the fairy, the Goddess of Mercy who gave her a golden carp. The bones of the golden carp magically turned into a dress, golden slippers, jewelry, and even a horse, which allowed Tam to attend a royal banquet. However, she fled upon seeing her stepmother and stepsister and left behind her slipper. The royal house searched for a young woman whose foot fit the slipper, and eventually found Tam and proceeded to have her married to the king.

In the second part of the tale, Tam was murdered by her stepmother, allowing Cam to take her place in the royal wedding, as custom dictated. Tam was able to

*reincarnate into a nightingale, until Cams killed it. From the feathers grew a white cedar tree, until Cam chopped it down to make a loom. The voice of Tam emerged from the loom and told Cam that she had stolen Tam's husband, and so Cam had the loom burnt. But from the ashes grew a persimmon tree. An old lady found the persimmon, but a voice came to her not to eat it. She took it home and eventually found Tam's spirit emerging from the persimmon into corporeal form, after which the persimmon was destroyed to keep Tam in human form. One day the king inquired into the preparation of a meal with the old lady, and found his beloved Tam. The king immediately had Tam brought to the palace to become the king's first wife. The shocked Cam was fearful that Tam was still alive. One day she asked Tam on how to keep her skin fair, to which Tam replied that Cam should bathe in boiling water. When Cam did this, she was boiled alive and died. Tam had Cam's flesh preserved in jars and sent to the stepmother. The stepmother thought it was food, and started eating it. A crow flew in by the window and started shouting that the stepmother was eating her own daughter's flesh. Annoyed, the stepmother eventually found a skull at the bottom of the jar and then died from shock."*¹

For me, this story is all about revenge, standing up for ourselves and fighting for peace. It is also about tolerance and how much people can tolerate until they have to rebel. This fairy tale is a crueler version of Cinderella. I also found it really interesting to see the difference between the way the West and the East look at the same thing from different perspectives. Although the two stories are almost twins, the cruelty was never pushed into such extremity in the Western version. Despite the monstrous ending, Tam, the Vietnamese Cinderella character is still a symbol of nice, patient and hardworking girls. It came to me that I wanted to use some of the elements of the fairy tale, especially the ending.

Apart from the main idea involving the fairy tale and fish sauce, I did a small analysis about female characters in Vietnamese films. In *Moon at the Bottom of the Well* (2008), after a long period of time experiencing false happiness, the female

¹ http://vietnamese.wikia.com/wiki/Story_of_T%E1%BA%A5m_%26_C%C3%A1m

protagonist would rather devote her life to a spiritual husband than her real unloyal husband. The film raises the idea if a woman feels happy to scarify or devote her life to her beloved one, no one should feel sympathized for her. However the bigger question is whether that person is well deserved or not.

The film that was the strongest inspiration for *The Scent of Fish Sauce* is *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993). Set in Vietnam in the mid-19th century, the film is about a young servant who enters a rich family, observes all of the events and hardship of the family until she moves to serve the friend of the eldest son and becomes his wife. The plot of the film seems almost far too subtle, without any drama or suspense. Some audiences complained about the slow pace and the obsession with beauty in the visual style that almost seemed for aesthetics only. Some viewers/critics even complained that the film has no story and is really bland, and that if someone asked them about the story they wouldn't be able to remember it. And the girl in this film, once again, represents the stereotypes of patience, a hard worker, and skillfulness in housework and beautiful gestures of Vietnamese woman. However, personally I can see a really subtle development of the female protagonist in this film. Besides all of those characteristics, I can see the woman in this film has a strong desire that she knows exactly how to achieve. Everything she does in the movie has its own purpose. She likes the son's friend and dresses up on some special occasion to attract him although her action is really subtle and seems unpurposed. She cooks delicious food for him. She arranges the house in a beautiful way to inspire him to create his art works. Day by day, she gains his trust and becomes his inspiration. I think she knows exactly to hook the guy in a subtle, elegant and beautiful way.

Inspired by those two sources, that film and the fairy tale, I wanted to create a female character that seems patient, weak and gentle outside but is strong, deep and dark inside. I thought about a Vietnamese girl, a foreigner who lives in the US, an outsider in society who is patient and sensitive but also isolated, depressed and oppressed. She has the ability to gain revenge for herself, to preserve what she

thinks is love and immortality. And I knew for sure that I wanted the girl to turn the guy into fish sauce, as a response to the fairy tale.

Writing script

I started planning the structure of the script in spring 2013. I intended to have the first draft of the script done in time to do pre-production in the fall of 2013. However, I wasn't able to get beyond the basic idea about the story, because I had no time to write it as my head was full of my pre-thesis.

I delayed the writing process through the summer of 2013. It was not a productive summer as I was confused about preparing for my departure from the US. The good news was I cooked a lot during those days so I was mentally preparing to make a film about cooking. The bad news was I kept questioning and challenging myself about the logic of the story, the violent and strange ending that I was obsessed with and the fear that the audience may not accept this story. I also overthought about the production as it would have been really complicated to fly an actress from Vietnam, and I worried about finding a believable Viet-American actress in the US. But my fears and worries were also just all excuses to postpone the writing process.

Finally, I started writing the first page two weeks after the fall semester started. Once I started writing though, everything moved forward really fast. I had the first draft of the script after two weeks. Through writing, I changed some details in the treatment. Instead of setting up a roommates situation, I changed the relationship of the two protagonists to nurse and patient in order to reduce the length of time in the story and make it stay closer to the form of short film.

When I shared the idea of the film with my classmates, many people assumed *The Scent of Fish Sauce* was a horror film. I had also emphasized the culture clash theme of the film with them. However, after the first presentation in front of class, it turned out that the script was more about isolation, melancholy and oppression. The cultural theme was not reflected apparently or obviously in that version of the script. I was worried as the script fell back to the recurring theme of melancholy and the original theme was not clear. However, after thinking about it, I thought it was a

good sign that the cultural theme was not so obvious. And I felt coming back to my instinct and true feeling about the theme of connection and isolation was a smart choice. Staying true to myself would lead the film to be a more honest piece.

Still questioning the logic of the story, I wrote the 2nd draft of the script in which I changed the set up and premise. The two protagonists now live in two different units in a duplex. The guy complains about the smell every time the girl cooks fish sauce. And they're getting to know each other better after they got in an accident and he needs her help. In this version, the story ends with a fantasy of the girl killing and turning the guy into fish sauce after they had some intimate moments.

After hearing feedback from my classmates, I decided to work on the first version as it created more encounter chances for the characters and the tension could be built up more organically. And the question about whether the ending should be a fantasy or reality was not answered by myself yet. I polished the first draft to move to the pre-production stage, and meanwhile kept writing the script.

Casting

I started announcing the casting call before Thanksgiving 2013. It was a little under-prepared. At that time, I was panicked because I knew finding a Vietnamese actress in the U.S. to play Mai (the female lead) could be really tricky. I knew that I should start casting earlier in order to make my decision, in case I had to fly an actress from Vietnam to the U.S. The visa application could be really complicated so the earlier the better.

I decided to post the casting call in several areas: New York, LA, Chicago and Texas. Accidentally I also posted the call for the male character in all those areas and despite the implicit nudity requirement, I was swamped with the amount of applications. However, I did not receive too many potential applications for the actress. Also, the majority of the applications for the guy were from NY or LA. I realized Texas was still a conservative market so not too many actors applied for a role that just required implicit nudity.

The online casting process for male candidates from LA and New York was not effective. After watching several audition videos, I did not see much potential in those candidates. Part of the reason was the nature of not meeting them directly in real life so I missed the chance to talk, explore, understand more about each candidate. After sending sides to a handful of female candidates from among twenty applications, all of them gave up the intention to audition for the role. I could explain myself they found it's hard to play a Vietnamese character with an accent while they are not Vietnamese or totally don't speak Vietnamese at all. I briefly considered casting a non-Vietnamese, but I did not think a non-Vietnamese actress could express and convey the Vietnamese mind and spirit in this role.

Although I was still trying the online casting with the slight hope that I could find an actress, I started holding some audition sessions in Austin. I invited Tram Ly, my friend's wife and a Viet-American actress that I had seen in another addition once. Tram's husband, Nhat Ho was the first person I met and became friends with

in Austin after he volunteered to pick me up and host me during my first days here. In my first year documentary, Nhat became my main subject, as his story was special and touching. Nhat and Tram have lived in the US for more than seven years without coming back home. I did not feature Tram in the documentary as she lived in Houston at that time. One year after I finished the film, Nhat and Tram got married and she moved to Austin to live with him.

I would have never thought she could be the actress for *The Scent of Fish Sauce* if a lucky coincidence had not happened. Lauren Kinsler and Tom Rosenberg, my two really good friends from my class decided to make a dogma film, which featured my performance. As they knew it was my last year in the US, they wanted to do something special for me. The story was about a Vietnamese who has to decide whether he should stay in the US with his Viet-American girlfriend, or return to Vietnam to see his dying mother; while knowing that once he leaves, he cannot come back. They needed a Vietnamese actress to costar with me. With a few names in my head, I contacted and recommended Tram to Lauren and Tom as I knew she was the one who had the most flexible schedule. Honestly, it was a gamble for us because Tram had no acting experience, but she was the only choice. Luckily, Tram agreed to be on board. We did not do the audition but we did a couple of rehearsals. While I was not sure about my acting ability, I was even more worried about Tram's. I didn't know if we were serious enough and ready for this film. However, I decided to try. It turned out that it was a really good experience. Tram's performance was really raw but really natural and believable. And many audiences said I did a decent job.

However, I did not totally believe that Tram was capable of delivering complicated Mai for *The Scent of Fish Sauce* mostly because she was a non-actress. A part of the reason was Tram's face is not a typical Vietnamese woman's, but more Chinese. I was also concerned about the fact she was heavily shortsighted and always needs to wear glasses, which could prevent her from expressing emotion through the eyes. But we can never know anything for sure until we really try. I did two auditions and each time I could see her improvement.

For the male role in the script, different from my expectation, I struggled even more to find a matching actor. Most of the actors translated Matt as a jerk so they delivered sultry takes on the sides. It seems like they did not understand the characters, the tone and the meaning behind the conflicts in the film well. One of my requirements for the actor is he should be sensitive enough to convey the insensitivity of Matt in the script.

There were five candidates for Matt, while there were two for Mai, including Tram Ly and one Viet-American girl; but all of them were not convincing for me after the callback. I were really worried and stressed after the callback. I decided to have a test shoot which I invited all of the potential names to do a scene in front of the camera with a small crew and lighting setup. I think it was a smart decision because at that time I was unsure about many things: actors, how smooth is my collaboration with the DP and what we should fix in the location.

In the test shoot, while the other actress delivered stiff and theatrical performance, Tram's performance was really impressive. She was natural and sensitive. She understood the directions very well and knew how to deliver various takes on the same action. She was flexible and confident. I also asked her to wear contact lenses and she looks really beautiful and cinematic on screen. And as a Vietnamese living in the states for a long time, she really understood the emotion of the script. Furthermore, she has the skills of Vietnamese woman. She is skillful at cooking. Last but not least, she is a nurse in real life. It's a big advantage in term of delivering professional nursing skill. I knew for sure she was the one and only although we had to practice and rehearse more in order to push her into the edge of the character.

For the male role, I was still reluctant in choosing between two candidates. Both of them were natural in acting. One actor was more the all-American type of guy who is really muscular and looks like a football player. Dillon Cavitt, the second candidate has a kind of forgettable personality, which is too normal to be called a stereotype. I tried to avoid casting a stereotype or making the male role a symbol of

something so Dillon would be a better choice. The con of Dillon is he may be too young for the role. I decided to work with Dillon as he is natural, has a fresh face and his slim body type would make some physical action scene in the film easier for the actress.

Pre-production

I started with casting first when not having a producer or any crew onboard. After having two casting sessions, I started crewing up.

I started finding the director of photography very soon. For me, this position is the most important collaborator besides the actors. For me, he or she should be a collaborator who I can really rely on visually and mentally. I also have a tendency to make some of most important decisions about visual style and mise-en-scene based on the ideas of the DP. I was in talk with several fellow grad students and three graduates from UT. After several talks, I was inclining not to work with people who have known me so well. Part of the reason was I was afraid our close relationship could not stimulate constructive debates to help the making of the film.

I was really lingering between two candidates. The cinematographer whom I really loved to work with has a really impressive portfolio. I was a big fan of her watching several grad students' theses she shot before. She has what I was looking for which is the sensitivity in framing and lighting. Unfortunately she was in LA and I could tell she was not sure about shooting another student film.

I decided to work with Huay-Bing Law, who graduated from UT undergrad program and was going to the UT's grad program really soon. I like Huay's lighting in his reel. One of my main concern was I was not sure if he was ready to adapt and shoot an Asian visual style film as I could see his previous works was more on a safer side. But I did believe a good DP should be capable of doing various styles as required by each project. I did believe Huay could work on his framing to create an exotic and sensual Asian visual style for the film although it's an English-speaking film and is set in the US. And one more of the good characteristics of Huay was he was really enthusiastic and excited to shoot this film. Furthermore, he is based in Austin so it was more convenient for pre-production and discussion for the film.

While trying to delay making up my mind, Huay was the only one who pushed me to make my decision.

Learning a big lesson from my pre-thesis, I knew that I would not make this film without a production designer. I asked Heidi Diederich, an emerging production designer who is based in Dallas to help the film. I was impressed with her works and knew her when helping some fellow student's projects. She agreed after reading the script. Coincidentally, her boyfriend is a Viet-American so it was really natural for her to explore more about Vietnamese culture and put it in the film to make it a Vietnamese – American fusion.

I was working with a young producer who just graduate from the undergrad program at the early stage of production. She was really helpful in the test shoot. I thought this could be a good collaboration as she not only has good skills but was also very enthusiastic and encouraging. She advised me to do a crowd funding campaign which I thought I did not have enough time, resources and confidence to pursue. Although she dropped out of the project due to an unforeseen upcoming job, I appreciate the help in the early stage.

I was really worried as there was no producer on board three weeks before the production started. It occurred in my mind that in my pre-thesis, the AD also did a part of the producer's job. Therefore, I asked Michael Roberson, whom I had already asked to AD for the film to help with producing. I had decided that we would make my Austin house the set. This meant we had only one location and the rest of the crew was locked at that point. So it was not extremely complicated to produce this film. However, I thought it might be heavy for Michael to work as both producer and AD, so I asked Caleb Kuntz, my close classmate to co-produce. While Michael could take care of production in general about the schedule, the crew and logistic each day, Caleb could help with more specific tasks like finding a special effect artist, finding crew in some low availability day and searching for food donation.

My classmates and fellow grad students quickly filled all of other main crew positions.

Visual style

During discussion with Huay about the visual style for the film, I stated my idea about the visual style for the film while Huay enriched it by adding his input.

Writing a one-location script made everything seem easier at first. However, the house in the script is a big location with different rooms. I always wanted to build a set or find a house and dress it. However, it was complicated and hard to achieve the look, the functions, the availability and the convenience to access. At a certain point during the pre-production, I knew that my Austin house met all of the criteria. It is an old house with vintage look. I could access the location whenever I wanted. It made everything easier for me, the production designer and the DP to discuss, prepare and achieve the look we wanted and the shooting plan. It was smart for the producers to plan the schedule too. Now I just had to deal with my housemates to make it a perfect set. And they agreed right away with my reason: it was a good chance to preserve the look of a place that we all love and feel familiar like home.

Living in my Austin house for almost two years, I have been observing how the sun travels around the house during the day and creates texture, depth, shadow and light. The house is pretty dark even during the day as a result of the surrounding trees. So I came up with some ideas with my DP that we should try the motif of light/ sunshine going through the branches and leaves of trees before hitting the subjects or background on frame.

Furthermore, a lot of shots in this film required top shots/ high angle shots or creates the opportunities to use them. For example, high angle shot should be the best choice for the hair washing and shaving scene. High angle shots can be used in a lot of cooking shots as well. Using both high angle shots in both those scenes could create the relation between the way Mai cooked the food and treated Matt. For me it was a good way to give a metonymy about Mai's psychology to audience. So my DP and I decided to use top shots as a recurring artistic choice.

I gave Tran Anh Hung's *The Scent of Green Papaya* and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* to my DP and production designer as a reference for Asian visual style. For me, *The Scent of Fish Sauce* should have an Asian fusion vision instead of a pure Asian vision as the story happens in the US. I suggested Huay use a more conventional lighting plan and framing. For Heidi, I suggested she create an Asian feeling although it is an American house in the film. Having been discovering and getting familiar with Vietnamese culture through her Viet-American boyfriend, Heidi did a great job mixing the furniture in my house with her set dressings to create a vintage house with a slight Asian motif.

For framing style, after discussion, we decided to mix between conventional framing and more risky/ unbalanced frames as generated by the mood/ situation of each scene. Huay suggested that we should use wider lens. I agreed with him as I always like wider lenses under 50mm to be closer to the subject and avoid the cliché of shallow depth of field. To maintain the depth of field, we would open the aperture and use more neutral density filter instead.

For the framing, we also decided that we would either use static frames or really smooth camera movement to convey the idea of conventional beauty, which has hidden potential rebellion underneath.

For the color tone of the film, we decided to do a test shoot to see how the house looked. The status of the house before shooting was pretty colorful with different color scheme for each room and it was quite vivid. Huay had a really strong reaction about the color scheme for the house that made me a little bit frustrated. I knew it was complicated to paint the house as I had to attain agreement from my housemates and the production designer lives in Dallas and just started setting up the set three days before the production. It was risky to change something that I was not really sure. However, I respected Huay's opinion that the current bright color tone of the paints did not support the tone of the film. So Heidi came up with a different color scheme for the film. Before that point, she intended to paint the door and windows' frames to wood color to make the whole set darker. Now she planned

to paint the walls in the kitchen, bathroom and dining room with a darker earth color tone instead. The idea of earth color naturally came from the theme of decomposition and preservation (which are the elements of creating fish sauce).

We also came up with the idea to mimic the color temperature of the sunset in some cooking scenes in order to create the amber color ambiance that looks like the color of fish sauce.

Working with actors

I had several rehearsals before the production started.

Tram is a nurse in real life. I did not want to ask Tram to do too many things as it might distract her from acting. However, after a long time searching for a nurse/ student to take care of the guy's bandage in the film without any result, I gave up and asked Tram for help. She agreed right away. During the rehearsals, I asked Tram to dress Dillon. I do think there was chemistry built up between them and it helped the collaboration.

I had some difficulties in directing Tram and Dillon in the first encounter scene when Mai feeds Matt the burger, the scene when Mai helps Matt to go the bathroom, and the dinner scene after the pee. Those were least favorite scenes for me to direct. I thought it was because the scenes were not written concisely enough. The burger scene was hard as it was the first time they really talk to each other. To create a conflict but not in a cliché way was tricky. I didn't want to make the male protagonist become a stereotype of a pretentious young college kid while I still wanted to maintain the cultural hurt for Mai. I gave the actor the direction of showing the disinterest in fish sauce while maintaining the charm and politeness when treating a stranger. I also wanted Matt to study Mai and be intrigued by Mai as he has been isolated in his room for a while and Mai was a type of girl Matt is unfamiliar with.

The peeing scene was challenging because it was the scene when the chemistry between the protagonists started to build up. They hate each other when the scene starts but understand each other more after the scene ends. After several takes in one rehearsal, I decided to cut the joke in the scene to make a more straightforward scene. It was also confusing to figure out with the actors which side the girl should support the guy and what was the right way to help him pee in that situation. I was glad that Tram helped me a lot based on her nursing knowledge.

For the first dinner scene, I had a hard time buying the set-up at the couch, in which Mai tried to convince Matt to have the burger after he requested ordering pizza. After several attempts rehearsing that scene, I changed the set-up to the dining room, and had Mai ask Matt to try her Vietnamese food instead. I found the scene was more believable that way.

I asked Tram to use her own experience working as a nurse and living in the US for eight straight years without coming back Vietnam to flesh her character out. Mai in the script has some similar features like Tram but she is way more extreme. For some scenes that required more intense emotion delivery, I pushed Tram further by asking Tram to use some of her most intense emotion and memory while living in the US to extract the purest flows of emotion. In those situations, she got into the finest after a few takes. A good example was the scene Mai puts Matt into the trash bin, pours salt over him and 'says goodbye' to him. It was a goodbye to a dream instead of simply putting someone into a trash bin. Tram did it so emotionally.

The more Tram performed, the better she was. In the first day, I had to use the trick of rolling without notifying her because she had a tendency of delivering less natural performance after rehearsal. However, she improved a lot after the first day. She looked even better on screen after each day. I'm also glad that we scheduled chronically and put more intense scenes at the end of the production schedule, including the shaving scene at the last day; Tram got to that emotion level right on time. Tram was a big surprise, as she understood my direction very well and really knew how to perform at the finest and most honest levels of emotion.

Furthermore, as a nurse, Tram was not shy in the situations when she had to take care of Dillon's body. I even pushed her acting further to reach to the slight line between nurse - patient relationship and intimate one.

For Dillon, as he was really young and even naive in real life, I asked him to deliver straight takes with real emotion at each situation on set. He has a fresh face, which is a big advantage, as audience can like him right away. However, his acting

was still really raw and some lines were choppy because he had some hard time memorizing lines. I still like Dillon's performance a lot as he delivered a different take of normal American guy, which is not so special, somehow forgettable but still impressive. Editing definitely would help refine his performance more.

For the mother, I cast Gayland Williams. She was really friendly and easy to work with. I was worried that her somewhat theatrical acting style might be too much contrast to Tram's spontaneous one. However, I thought the contrast made the scenes more interesting. Tram seemed more oppressed and suppressed in the opening while in the ending scene, the balance of power was switched.

Production

A few days before the production started, I still felt I was not ready to do this. The feeling of shooting a thesis film was really weird. I was overwhelmed with the rest of the pre-production. We could not find art assistants for Heidi so I was the one who helped her and some friends came to help for a few hours. It was my first time painting though. It was true to independent film spirit which a director does everything himself. I was not sure the new color palette would work until the production started. It was really risky but it was a part of student film, which is normally right at the level between amateur and professionalism.

I had more difficulties as some of the crewmembers could not help with last minute notifications. I caused some distraction for me and made me extremely stressed. However, Michael and Caleb handled this issued really well.

During the production, we had a little bit trouble with the noise from the street in one day as a marathon happened, and also when we shot in the bedroom, which is really close to 38th street, a very busy street at times.

I also had some pressure to finish right before 4pm on some days as the actress had to leave for her job. I thought I made some mistakes under the pressure of time. For example, the 1st interview scene and the hair washing scene could have been better if we could spend more time shooting them. A few mistakes of soft focus or performance and mise-en-scene did chase me later in the postproduction.

The working chemistry between Huay and me also improved a lot during the production. I was not sure if it was going to work out until the first day of production. There were some language issues that made me frustrated during the pre-production. Sometimes I had a hard time explain my idea to Huay. For example, during our first meeting, I said I wanted to shoot this film in an unsafe way with Asian fusion vision style. When hearing the term “unsafe”, Huay thought I would mise-en-scene the film in unconventional way. After seeing my shot list, he was

shocked as I covered some scenes in a very traditional way. I had to explain to him that I covered a scene in some angles although as a director, I knew that just used a few or even one shot because of the responsibility to the editor and even me in the postproduction later. Furthermore, the 'unsafe' idea is more about using my own natural style to create a unique film rather than trying to make it different from other films and becoming pretentious. After a few small misunderstandings, we worked really well together. Huay was super easy to work with and he treated everybody in the crew really nice. He was also super quick in every set up which helped my working style a lot. I was normally not patient and easy to lose concentration if it took too much time to set up. I also appreciated Huay's input in blocking, which is my least favorite part in directing. At the second half of the shoot, the chemistry was really good as we took more risk in framing.

Although we were short of staff for a few days, the productions run smooth and effectively with the conduction of Michael Roberson. We scheduled to shoot in eight days but finished one day ahead of time. I love all of my crew as they worked hard and really enthusiastic. We still made few mistakes but overall the working atmosphere was my favorite out of my four narrative productions in Austin.

Postproduction

Taking ten days off after the production to have some distance from the film, I started post production with syncing and logging. I decided to edit the film by myself to have a good rough cut and then pass it to Kyle Seaquist, a good editor from my class. I would have preferred to let Kyle edit the film from the beginning but he had committed to another grad thesis film beforehand.

I had the rough cut after two weeks. I put every scene from the script into the rough cut. Knowing that I needed feedback from audience, I decided to hold a rough-cut test screening. Fortunately enough the audience didn't see too many problems from the cut. They did recommend some changes in pacing and structure. The good news was although it was a 27 minutes cut, the majority of them felt like it was 17 minutes instead. There was a debate about the ending and whether the beginning is needed or not.

I also sent the cut to an editor who I used to work with in Vietnam. He suggested some changes in pacing up the beginning and some cutting suggestion to make the film more concise.

Working by myself after the rough-cut screening was not a good idea. I just cut two minute out of the film for the fine cut screening. Kyle got on board after the fine cut and we cut another three minutes. Kyle was really helpful as he made the cut much leaner and the pace was much better. There were some debates about whether we should have cut the whole beginning or changing the ending. I did shoot an alternative ending which was less cruel. Kyle and I did some experiment with the second ending and it was quite interesting. However, after consideration, I switched back to the original ending. For me, to build up a twist like that in the story, I should have directed this film into a very different way. Furthermore, I wanted to push things into extremity for this project rather staying at the middle.

I did the sound mix with Eric Friend, a really experienced sound mixer. Our goals for sound were helping the pace of the film and deepening the surreal quality

by letting small sound in the film stand out more in order to depict Mai's internal world. We also gradually decreased the level of ambiance in the film to support the idea of surrealism.

I worked with Xo Xinh, the music composer for my pre thesis film again. His strength is electronic and experimental music but he had discovered and used Vietnamese musical instruments more and more. Our initial idea was using piano with a glimpse of Vietnamese musical instruments. I used some of his existing live performances when cutting the rough cut. The tracks matched the tone of the film and sounded like they were composed exclusively for each scene of the film. After discussion, we decided to combine some existing tracks with some new ones written for the film. Instead of using Vietnamese musical instruments which may be too jarring or too distinctive, we decided to use Western musical instruments to play the fusion of Western and Oriental melody. The music was dark, mysterious but still romantic, which totally match this film.

Crowd-funding campaign

Encouraged by Caleb Kuntz, the co-producer and pushed by the fact I took the Funding to Film festival class, I wanted to do a crowdfunding campaign for the film. I was not confident, as I knew it sometimes became a popularity contest. However, I still decided to do it, as I know it was a really good chance and time to do it. Crowd funding is seldom heard in Vietnam. Therefore it was risky to do it because Vietnamese do not have a habit of donate for art and I did not know too many American friends.

However, it was a success. After pushing the campaign really hard, I even exceeded the \$3500 goal. The good news was 90% of donation came from Vietnam. It made me strongly believe that friends and audience in Vietnam would be more willing to donate more for my other projects. The success of the campaign made me feel more confident during postproduction and put some pressure to make a really good film to meet the expectation of friends and audience.

Conclusion

After three years studying in the US, I had improved my directing skill and refined my technical skill as well. The Scent of Fish Sauce can be considered as the culmination of what I have learned and experienced here. As a perfectionist, I saw mistakes everywhere in the film but I accepted the fact that it is hard to have absolute perfection. I am confident to say I can fix the mistakes and shortcomings once I work professionally. However, the ideal professional crew is still only one element, the more important thing is to keep working and cultivating my skills more to reach to the next level.

At a certain point, I was unsure about everything in this film. I kept questioning myself about the extremity of the film. I was not sure about the surreal quality of it. I also challenged myself about the logic of the film. Can a story like this happen in real life?

At the same time, I said to myself that it was not good to be an 'unsure' artist. What I have learned from this project is a true artist should know what exactly he wants and aims for it. I was unsure about the ending of this story and it took a lot of time and energy to consider and make up my mind while distracting me from digging out other elements deeper.

At the end, the love of the girl in the film is just my love for America. I would like to keep the ending of the film as a symbol of preservation of love.

Appendix A: Shooting script

THE SCENT OF FISH SAUCE
7TH DRAFT 2/7/2014

Written by

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FADE IN

1 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

1

MAI (early 20s, Asian) sits on a couch. The living room is dark although it's day time. Sunshine outside reflects sparkling dusts on the windows. A few pieces of old furniture fill the room but cannot cover the lack of human trace in the house. SARAH (50) sits opposite.

SARAH
I'm glad that you made it. I have
to leave in thirty minutes.

Mai nods her head, shyly smiles.

SARAH (CONT'D)
(dryly)
So I understand you have
experienced with these types of
injuries?

MAI
(Vietnamese accent)
I'm majoring in nursing. I used to
take care of my father before he
died.

SARAH
I'm sorry to hear that dear.

A silent moment. Mai smiles to break the silence.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Well, here's the situation: my son
Matt was on his bike and got hit by
a car. I've stayed here for two
weeks taking care of him but I have
to go home soon. He is doing better
though. I'm glad that we found you
last minute.

Beat.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Can you cook?

MAI
Yes, I can.

SARAH
What kind of food?

MAI
I know Asian food. Vietnamese.

SARAH
My son is not really a fan of Asian food.

MAI
I'm a quick learner.

SARAH
Good to hear. Do you smoke or drink?

MAI
No.

SARAH
What percentage of your friends smoke or drink?

MAI
(a beat)
I don't know. Maybe 20%?

SARAH
Do you have a boyfriend?

MAI
No.

SARAH
I'm going to need your social.

MAI
My what?

SARAH
Do you not have one?

A beat.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Not a big deal, your passport number will suffice Mai.

Mai tries to follow what Sarah's saying.

2 EXT. PORCH - DAY

2

Mai pulls her rolling carry-on to the front door. She unlocks and opens the door.

3.

3 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 3

The sound of carry-on rolling on the floor and Mai's footsteps stand out. She walks to

4 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 4

She opens the carry-on, taking out a bottle of fish sauce, some vegetables and a package of meat.

Mai cuts onion, trying to wipe water from her eyes with her sleeves.

Mai mixes ground beef with onion in a food processor. The sound of the knife blade in the processor.

Mai looks around the spice shelves. After picking up and putting down different bottles and boxes, she picks up the bottle of fish sauce. Mai pours some fish sauce into the food processor.

She makes a meat ball and presses it with her hands to create a burger.

She fries the burger.

She puts the burger between buns, completing the burger with more fish sauce and lettuce.

5 INT. HALLWAY - DAY 5

Mai brings the dish and walks to Matt's room.

Standing in front of Matt's room, Mai knocks on the door.

MAI

Excuse me, do you want to eat now?

MATT (O.S.)

Yeah come on in.

Mai pushes the door and walks in.

6 INT. MATT'S ROOM - DAY 6

The room is dark. MATT (22) lies on the bed, scruffy. His right hand and left leg are bandaged. Everything in the room is not well-organized. Blanket and clothes are on the floor.

He tries to sit up. Mai puts the dish on the desk and helps Matt. Matt rests his back on the wall.

Mai brings the burger to Matt.

Not having received the dish yet, Matt sniffs and grimaces.

MATT
Smells weird. It smells like
death...

Mai still holds the dish in her hands.

Matt leans forward and inhales the burger.

MATT (CONT'D)
Is it the burger?

Mai looks at Matt.

MATT (CONT'D)
What did you put in it?

MAI
Beef, onion, pepper.

MATT
That's it?

MAI
Black pepper, garlic...

Beat.

MAI (CONT'D)
And fish sauce.

MATT
Fish sauce?

MAI
Fish sauce. I could not find salt
in the kitchen.

MATT
What is fish sauce?

MAI
It's... just, it's fish sauce.

MATT
Why do we have it here?

MAI
For my food.

5.

MATT
Can you please not put it in my
food?

Mai and Matt look at each other for a beat, then Matt looks
back to the burger.

MATT (CONT'D)
I can't eat that.

MAI
I'm sorry.

Mai brings the dish out of the room.

7 EXT. BACKYARD - DAY 7

She dumps the burger to the compost.
Maggots in the compost surround the burger.

8 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 8

Mai closes all the doors in the kitchen, one by one.
She puts a fish on a cutting board. She chops the head of the
fish. She cleans and guts the fish. Then she slices the fish.
She makes caramel, puts the fish in the pot and pours some
fish sauce into the pot.
The amber liquid in the pot starts boiling. Mai turns on the
hood.

9 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 9

Mai is still in the kitchen. All of the doors and windows are
closed. The hood is still on.
She stands, eating Vietnamese Fish Simmered In Caramel Sauce
with rice.
She lights a candle.
She cleans up the stove.
She sprays air refresher.
She washes the pot and the dishes, creating bubble of soap
and soaking the dishes under the hot steamy steam of water.

Mai opens all windows, one by one.

A sound of something hitting the floor from outside the kitchen.

10 INT. HALLWAY - DAY 10
Mai walks to Matt's room in hurry.

11 INT. MATT'S ROOM - DAY 11
Mai steps in hesitantly.

MAI
Do you need something?

MATT
I need to use the bathroom.

Mai walks to Matt's bed. She lifts Matt's body while Matt tries to push against the wall to stand up.

12 INT. HALLWAY - DAY 12
Mai holds Matt's body. Matt jumps with his one leg while Mai supports his body.

13 INT. BATHROOM - DAY 13
Mai supports Matt to sit down on the toilet.

MATT
Well... this day came much earlier
than I thought it would.

Matt sits down on the toilet.

MAI
What day?

MATT
Sitting down to pee.

MAI
I thought here in the US, men sit
on toilet like women?

MATT
What? Why would you think that?

MAI
Because you guys pee in all
directions.

Matt bursts into laughter.

Mai stands still, watching Matt. What should she do next?

Matt struggles to pull off his boxers.

Mai steps closer to Matt. She kneels down.

MATT
Can you leave?

Mai's face is redden. She stands up, turns back and walks away.

Matt tries hard to stand up and use the other hand to pull off his boxers.

MATT (CONT'D)
Can you help me?

A beat. Mai turns back. She pulls off his boxer, looking to the Matt's face.

14 INT. HALLWAY - DAY

14

Mai stands in front of the door. The sound of peeing. Following is the sound of flushing.

Mai waits. A beat.

MATT (O.S.)
Can you wait a minute?

MAI
Yes.

15 INT. BATHROOM - DAY

15

Matt still sits on the toilet. He uses toilet paper to clean some pee on the floor.

Matt reaches the furthest point with difficulty.

MATT
I need your help, Mai.

Mai pushes the door.

Matt quickly pulls up his boxers.

Mai stands still for a while.

Mai hide her eyes by looking at the sink.

The floor with the splash of pee.

MATT (CONT'D)
Can you help me stand up?

She turns her head slowly to make sure Matt has his boxers on. Mai pulls Matt up.

MATT (CONT'D)
(really close to Mai's
head)
This is embarrassing.

Mai smiles.

16 INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

16

Matt sits at the dinning table. Matt puts some dishes on the table.

MATT
Thank you.

Mai smiles slightly.

Matt looks at the food reluctantly.

MATT (CONT'D)
Hand me my phone, I think I'm going
to order some pizza.

MAI
(looks straight to Matt)
Can you try my food?

A beat.

MATT
Did you put fish sauce in it?

MAI
Just a little bit. It will taste
good. I'm sure.

A beat.

MATT

Sure.

Mai smiles. She keeps looking straight at Matt' eyes.

Matt uses a fork to get a piece of Vietnamese braise pork. But he keeps holding it while opening his mouth and closing his eyes.

MATT (CONT'D)

Here goes nothing.

Matt bites the first bite. He chews it and swallows it.

MATT (CONT'D)

It actually tastes better than I thought... just smells gross.

Matt bites the second bite.

Mai looks at Matt eating.

MATT (CONT'D)

I mean, it's pretty good.

18 INT/ EXT. MATT'S ROOM - DAY

18

Mai makes up Matt's bed.

Through the windows, she sees

Matt practices walking in the porch with a crutch. His leg is less bandaged.

Mai follows each of Matt's step, back and forth.

Matt catches Mai's looking at him. He smiles.

19 INT. BATHROOM - DAY

19

Matt, shirtless and in his boxers, sits on the floor. His hand is less bandaged. His head lies against the bathtub. Mai stands in the bathtub.

Mai pours water on Matt's hair with a hand shower.

Her fingers comfort his hair and his head.

Matt closes his eyes, feeling Mai's fingers moving on his head. He breathes by mouth.

MATT

So Mai, how is this fish sauce made?

MAI

They catch fresh fish, and put only the freshest, almost alive ones in huge wooden containers. They put a ton of salt to cover the fish and wait for several months until an amber liquid is extracted from the fish.

Mai creates bubble on Matt's head by caressing his hair.

MATT

So people make it at home?

MAI

Yes. Basically, it's just like throwing waste food into the compost... To reserve the smell of fish forever.

Matt startles as Mai touches his head.

MAI (CONT'D)

I remember one time I visited the fisherman village. They make fish sauce there. When I opened the container, there was a ton of maggots on the top. I could not eat fish sauce for a long time.

MATT

(interrupting)
Maggots? What?!

Mai pours more water on Matt's head to clean the shampoo bubbles.

MAI

But after a while, I could enjoy it again. Vietnamese say the best fish sauce is the one with maggots in it.

MATT

You're joking right?

Matt opens his eyes. Mai uses a towel to dry Matt's hair.

They lock eyes for a moment before Mai smiles to Matt.

Mai helps Matt to sit on a chair.

Mai uses a wet cloth to clean Matt's body. She cleans his back, his chest. Then she cleans his thighs.

MAI
Do you want to clean your private parts yourself?

Their faces are really close.

MATT
I may need your help.

Mai reaches her hand under his boxer and starts cleaning his private part.

Matt startles.

Mai startles. She takes out her hand.

MATT (CONT'D)
I'm sorry.

Mai smiles.

Matt looks like a young boy, fresh and clean.

20 INT. KITCHEN - DAY - MONTAGE 20

Mai does a julienne cut of carrot and daikon.

She pours fish sauce and red pepper into the mix of carrot and daikon on a dish. She mixes it. Then she puts grilled shrimps on top of the dish.

21 INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT - MONTAGE 21

She opens the lid of a pot, tastes the soup and pour some fish sauce into it.

She opens the lid of a clay pot. It's braised pork. The dark amber liquid is boiling. She pours some scallions on the top and turns of the stove.

She get some rice from the rice cooker. It's smoking. She smells the smell of rice.

She puts the soup, the rice and the braised pork in the clay pot and the salad on a large tray and brings to

13.

She turns her head around, trying to push him away. He still holds her tightly.

She grips his hand and loosens up. He loosens up. Her breath is heavy. They lock eyes for a moment. He kisses her.

28 INT. MATT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 28

Mai and Matt sniff and caress each other's neck.

Mai is on the bed. Her body is under the comforter.

Matt gets into bed. He takes off his shirt. He gets under the comforter.

Matt takes off his shorts under the comforter. He is on top of Mai.

Mai moves her hand under the comforter and takes off her undies while Matt kisses her.

Mai stares at Matt. He breaths heavily.

Mai moans and breaths heavily beat by beat. She sees Matt closing his eyes.

Mai pushes her hands against Matt's chest. She is then loosen up. She keeps staring to the ceiling while Matt is inside her.

29 INT. MATT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 29

Matt is in his shorts, sleeping and snoring lightly like a child. On the other side of the bed, Mai looks at him.

30 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 30

Mai fries eggs.

She takes some slices of bread from the toaster.

She pours hot water into a Vietnamese coffee filter.

31 INT. DINING ROOM - DAY 31

Mai sets up the table. She puts the omelette dish, the cups of coffee and the bread on the table.

Matt comes to the dining room. He wears jeans and a shirt.

MATT
(playfully)
Good morning!

Mai looks up.

MAI
Hi Matt.

MATT
I'm gonna go out.

MAI
Are you able to do that?

MATT
Able and willing.

MAI
You don't want to have breakfast
together?

MATT
No. I appreciate it, I do, but my
friends are waiting on me.

Matt takes his bike and opens the front door. He gets out of
the house.

Mai sits alone in the dining room.

32 EXT. BACKYARD - DAY 32

Mai opens the compost and throws the egg and the bread into
the compost.

Maggots in the compost surround the egg and the bread.

33 INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT 33

Mai sits at the dining table. Dinner is on the table. A sound
of door opening.

MATT
Hello hello!

Mai looks up and Matt and smiles.

Matt walks to the table, holding a bag and of fast food and
drink.

15.

MATT (CONT'D)
I just bought a burger. Do you want
to share it?

Mai smiles.

34 INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

34

Mai and Matt sit opposite at the dining table. Mai eats her
food while Matt eats his burger.

Mai looks at Matt eating.

MAI
You look so scruffy. Do you want a
shave?

Matt nods his head.

35 INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

35

Matt totally lies down on the roll chair.

Mai shaves his face, then to his neck. She totally
concentrates on her work.

MATT
I think starting tomorrow I can do
this myself Mai. I appreciate the
help though.

Mai stops shaving. The knife is still on Matt's neck.

MAI
Can I still stay in the house?

MATT
I know your contract was for a bit
longer but I'm feeling much better
now.

Mai concentrates on shaving again.

MATT (CONT'D)
Shit, I can't wait to go back to
school.

Mai stops.

MATT (CONT'D)
You can always visit if you want.

Mai stares at Matt. He looks like a young boy. She smiles.

Mai cuts Matt's neck. He startles. Blood splashes.

MATT (CONT'D)

What...

Mai uses a towel to suffocate Matt's head. Blood soaks into the towel. Matt shakes. After a while, Matt does not move anymore.

Mai looks at Matt affectionately. Matt lies on the chair, immobile. He looks like a sleeping child.

36 INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT 36

Mai cleans Matt body. She shaves his chest hair.

37 EXT. BACKYARD - NIGHT 37

She moves a city trash bin to the backyard. She pours water in it and cleans it.

38 INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT 38

She pulls the trash bin to the house.

She lets the bin lay down on the floor. She moves and pushes the body into the bin.

She struggles pushing the bin to make it stand up.

Standing on a chair, she pours and spreads salt into the bin. She runs out of salt.

She opens her carry-on and takes out many bags of salt.

White salt covers a part then the whole body of naked Matt. White salt.

39 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 39

Mai sits at the couch. A sound of a key opening the door.

Sarah shows up. She rolls her luggage to the living room.

It takes a while before Mai turns her head and look at Sarah.

SARAH

Wow. You're still here?

A beat. Mai smiles and holds her answer.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Where is Matt? The house smells weird.

MAI
He went out. Are you hungry?

SARAH
Yes, I'm a bit hungry in fact.

MAI
I will cook for you.

SARAH
How sweet you are!

40 INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

40

Sarah and Mai sit opposite.

Sarah looks at the food and the bowl of fish sauce hesitantly.

Mai picks up chopsticks, using them to pick up boiled daikon and carrot and dip it into the fish sauce.

Sarah follows, using a fork. She smells the carrot.

SARAH
It smells really intense here.

She grimaces and reluctantly tries it. A beat.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Yes, really intense.

Mai smirks. The camera moves on the top of their heads to the trash bin. We see an amber liquid inside it with maggots on top. A sound of key and door opening. Matt shows up.

41 INT. KITCHEN - DAY

41

Matt stir fries some vegetable. He pours some fish sauce to the pan.

Sarah goes to Matt. She sniffs.

SARAH
So you cook with fish sauce now?

18.

Matt smiles.

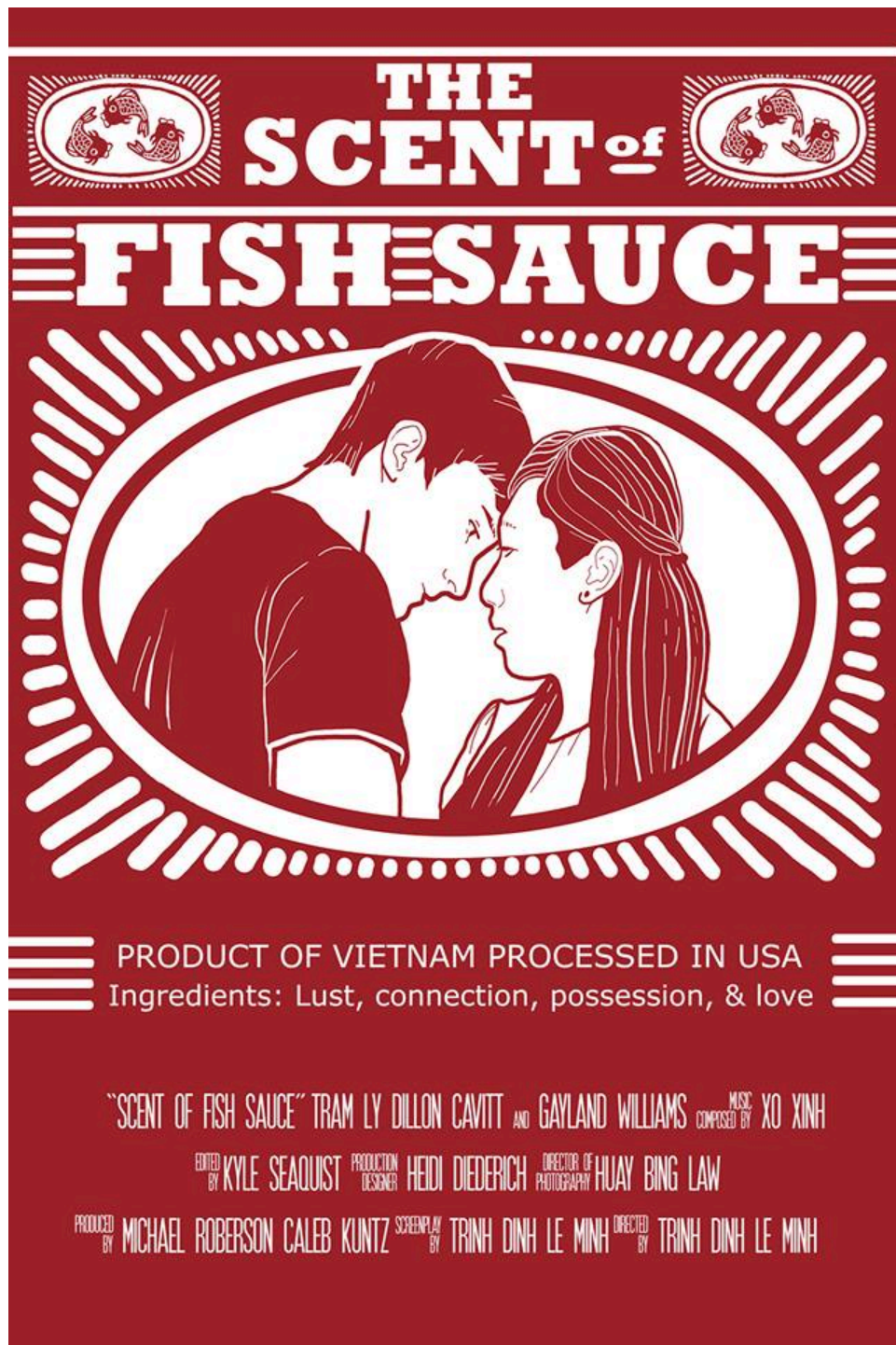
42 INT/ EXT. PORCH - DAY

42

Mai looks inside the house. She sees Matt and Sarah sitting at the dining table. She closes the door and rolls her carry-on to the street.

FADE TO BLACK

Appendix B: Poster



Vita

Minh Dinh Le Trinh was born in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. Since obtaining a double degree from the University of Economics HCMC and the University of Theatre and Cinema HCMC in 2008, Minh has published two cinema books titled “10 tips about cinematography” and “When young directors become older”. He got involved in several film productions in Vietnam before receiving a Fulbright scholarship and entered the grad film program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2011.

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This report was typed by the author.